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ABSTRACT

This digest examines critical literacy and discusses why it is important to include it in instruction for adults learning English as a Second Language (ESL). Critical literacy takes learners beyond the development of basic literacy skills such as decoding, predicting, and summarizing and asks them to become critical consumers of the information they receive. Because texts often presuppose cultural knowledge, social attitudes, or the views of a particular segment of society, adult English language learners can benefit from instruction that helps them draw on their background knowledge and look critically at texts. Both beginning level and advanced adult ESL learners can participate in activities that develop critical literacy skills. A teacher might add a few questions or a different perspective to the activities already being used in class. Opportunities for comparison to what these learners already know about a subject should be investigated. Several practical suggestions for how to build critical literacy skill building exercises into the ESL curriculum are provided. Critical literacy instruction encourages learners to engage information sources more thoroughly and to question social contexts, purposes, and the possible effects of these facts on their lives, and also to examine their own opinions, biases, and perceptions of reality. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education) (KFT)

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What is heard (e.g., news reports, public speakers, conversation) and what is read (e.g., newspapers, tabloids, Internet-based material) is not necessarily accurate nor unbiased. Learners need to develop skills to identify and work with this non-neutral facet of language (Hull, 2000). Critical literacy takes learners beyond the development of basic literacy skills such as decoding, predicting, and summarizing and asks them to become critical consumers of the information they receive.

This digest examines what critical literacy means. It discusses why critical literacy is important to include in instruction for adults learning English as a second language (ESL) and gives some examples of how this can be done.

Critical Literacy: The Concept

Critical literacy encompasses a range of critical and analytical attitudes and skills used in the process of understanding and interpreting texts, both spoken and written. Currently, in adult education, it is most often discussed in relation to literacy and language learning. In these contexts, it draws from a number of related theories concerned with the constant interplay of reader and text in the meaning-making process (Auerbach, 1999; Brown, 1999; Clark, 1995; Hood, Solomon, & Burns, 1996).

In its broadest sense, the term critical literacy refers to efforts to go beyond surface meaning of a text by questioning the who, what, why, and how of its creation and eventual interpretation (Lohrey, 1998). However, depending on the ideas, approaches, and pedagogics embraced by those using it, critical literacy can take different forms in actual practice. For example, for those who recognize that language use is not neutral, critical literacy is a means for examining the interaction of language and power relationships. For those who believe that language and text are intended to persuade, justify, entertain, and so on, critical literacy is a means of identifying the writer's or speaker's purpose and for eventually using the language oneself for such purposes. For theorists who derive their concept of critical literacy from Freire—a Brazilian educator who believed that education and knowledge have power only when they help learners liberate themselves from oppressive social conditions (Peyton & Crandall, 1995)—it is a way in which learners can decipher the issues that drive society, empower themselves, and ultimately take social action. (Auerbach, 1999; Brown, 1999; Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 1999; Hull, 2000). Many practitioners and theorists look at critical literacy practice as a combination of these perspectives (Brown, 1999).

Related terminology such as critical thinking, critical pedagogy, critical practice, critical theory, genre theory, and critical language awareness are sometimes used in conjunction with critical literacy, thus making understanding of the term even more complex. For an in-depth discussion of critical approaches to teaching ESOL, see the Autumn 1999 issue of *TESOL Quarterly*, which is dedicated to this topic.

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Reasons for Critical Literacy Instruction

Good listeners and readers make use of their background knowledge to evaluate what they are hearing or reading. Because texts often presuppose cultural knowledge, social attitudes, or the views of a particular segment of society, adult English language learners can benefit from instruction that helps them look critically at texts. Learners can be encouraged to question the social, political, and ideological elements in what they hear, say, read, and write. In this way, they can more fully explore the issues that affect their lives and consider the consequences of taking action to address these issues (Auerbach, 1999; Brown, 1999; Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 1999; Hull, 2000). Lessons that incorporate critical literacy perspectives can help learners examine the source of a text, including its biases and purposes; question the veracity and applicability of the information being provided in terms of their own lives; assess the broader societal messages about values, attitudes, and power relationships that are being conveyed through the text; and consider their own biases, reactions, and realities in relation to the text. Thus, these lessons will contribute to learners' more comprehensive understanding of texts and the larger society (Brown, 1999; Hood, Solomon, & Burns, 1996; Lohrey, 1998).

Regardless of the form in which critical literacy is practiced in the classroom, there is recognition of the need for English language learners to take critical stances toward reading, writing, speaking, or listening. Variations on critical literacy practices can be found in standards efforts such as Equipped for the Future (Stein, 2000) and in the list of skills and competencies identified by the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) (U.S. Department of Labor, 1991).

Critical Literacy Activities

Both advanced level and beginning adult ESL learners can participate in activities that develop critical literacy skills.

With *higher level English language learners*, a teacher might add a few questions or a different perspective to activities already being used. For example, after students have read a news article, the teacher might ask, "Why do you think this text was written?" "What language in the text gives you clues about its purpose?" "How would this article have been written in your country?" "How could this article have been written to better target your community in the United States?" In another activity, learners can examine a local English language newspaper, comparing its article topics, writing style, sections, photographs, and layout to those of a local native language newspaper. The students can then discuss what these aspects reveal about both cultures and how this can influence who reads the newspapers and which advertisers support them. In activities like these, learners are prompted not only to ask questions about the information presented, but also to relate this information to their own perceptions, attitudes, and realities.

Although these types of activities are also appropriate for *learners at lower English proficiency levels*, teachers need to build in more contextual and linguistic supports, discuss issues that are relevant to the learners, and use concrete materials such as codes. Codes are pictures, text, or speech representations of themes or issues that are used with follow-up questions to trigger reflection, dialogue, and critical thinking among a group of learners. Because they are simple, familiar, focused representations of complex, often emotionally charged issues or situations, codes can be structured for use with low level learners (Auerbach, 1992). For example, in a unit on families, learners might listen to a short, simple dialogue between a child's teacher and a father, in which the teacher tells the father that the family should speak English at home to help improve the child's English. The learners can then move through sets of questions that progress from describing the situation and the issue (Who is the woman? Who is the man? Where are they? What are they talking about? How does the teacher feel? How does the father feel? Why are they talking?) to examining the issue in terms of their own lives and in terms of the larger social context (Do you have children? Do you talk to your children's teachers? What do they say? How do you feel? In your country, did you talk to your children's teachers? What did they say? What language do you speak at home? Why? Why does the teacher here give this advice? Do you agree with her? Is this advice good for everyone?).

Critical Literacy Strategies

Teachers can make critical thinking and critical analysis a regular part of all classroom work in the following ways:

- Start with information sources (articles, advertisements, speeches, dialogues, pictures, videos) that are obviously biased or ideologically loaded, such as an advertising campaign against smoking, and then progress to more subtle examples, such as a play or sitcom that demonstrates negative aspects of smoking.
- Raise awareness by pointing out critical literacy skills when they are exhibited by the teacher or by learners.
- Choose readings or listening, speaking, or writing activities that are relevant and interesting for learners.
- Prompt learners to examine how their own experiences and values relate to and influence their approaches to topics.
- Understand that some learners may feel uncomfortable expressing opinions, especially if this kind of learning approach is new to them.
- Be aware that multiple interpretations of information and different points of view may or may not be represented in classroom texts, materials, and discussions, so choose activities in which learners must consider a variety of perspectives.
- Build in time for learners to become comfortable with texts or activities before asking them to look at them critically.
- Have learners formulate questions as well as answer them.
- Balance instruction in basic literacy skills (decoding, vocabulary building, predicting, summarizing) with practice in critical analysis skills.
- Provide support for challenging aspects of a task (pre-practice new vocabulary or grammar points, clarify the main idea of a text, choose a familiar topic, etc.) so that learners can focus on critical or analytical points.
- Use authentic texts (newspaper articles, advertisements, letters, news broadcasts) and less traditional literacy texts (graffiti, cartoons, commercials, television sitcoms) whenever possible.
- Shift from an emphasis on finding a right answer to eliciting ranges of interpretations that are supported by sound reasoning and thoughtful examination.

Conclusion

Critical literacy is a way of interacting with information that goes beyond the decoding of letters and words. It encourages learners to engage with information sources and to question the social contexts, purposes, and possible effects that they have on their lives. It also asks them to look at their own opinions, biases, and perceptions of reality, and to consider those of others. For adult ESL learners, critical literacy can be a means of comprehensively exploring the new language and culture in which they find themselves.

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